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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 LILONGWE 000207

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [MI](#)

SUBJECT: MALAWI MEDIA PRIMER

REF: 03 LILONGWE 1058

1. SUMMARY: The government-controlled Malawi Broadcasting Corporation radio is the main source of news for the average Malawian. Two independent daily newspapers are read by a small segment of the urban population. Private (commercial, religious, community) radio stations reach urban centers in the South and Central regions. The urban elite has access to the country's only television station, which is also state-owned. For a country that has only been free for ten years, following a 30-year dictatorial regime, the private media get good marks for progress. Private radio stations are increasing, self-censorship by the media is lessening, and open debate about the importance of media freedom is commonplace. END SUMMARY.

RADIO: THE DOMINANT MEDIA

2. Government-owned and -operated Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) is the only radio station that broadcasts throughout the country. Broadcasting in English and the major ethnic languages, MBC reaches the widest audience of any medium in Malawi. The station broadcasts all presidential events and activities live. MBC gives priority and prominence to news coverage of government and ruling UDF party events and very little to opposition parties and leaders.

3. Independent radio in Malawi is limited in geographical reach. There is, however, a growing number of private radio stations whose listenership and influence continue to expand. Capital Radio, on the air since 1999, reaches Blantyre and Lilongwe. The FM commercial radio station is renowned for controversial talk shows that are unbiased. Capital FM is an affiliate of the Voice of America, an arrangement that provides Malawians with a clear FM transmission of VOA news and programs.

4. The Malawi Institute of Journalism (MIJ) is part of the University of Malawi journalism department and operates its own private radio station. It broadcasts in the Southern Region. The station has earned a reputation of airing opposition politics and presenting a wide spectrum of political coverage. MIJ has experienced some pressure from the government to limit its role as a teaching institution only (and to refrain from airing political news), but MIJ is dedicated to furthering the role of independent media in Malawi.

5. Power FM 101 is a hit music radio station targeting young audiences in Blantyre and Lilongwe. The station, however, carries news bulletins hourly. FM 101 is co-owned by the son of a former cabinet minister who resigned last year from the ruling UDF party after the President chose his successor without input from the party. Since the rift between the owner's father and the UDF party and government, FM 101 is airing more political news than it had in the past.

6. Community radio stations are increasingly important in the Malawi news arena. A new community station has been established in Nkhosakota in the Central Region in addition to Dzimwe community radio in Mangochi (just at the southern tip of Lake Malawi) that was opened five years ago. Community radio is supposed to air news important to the communities it serves, but these stations are airing ever more political issues.

7. Religious stations - two Catholic, two Christian and one Islamic - carry general news and development issues, but focus primarily on religious material. Like community stations,

religious stations are beginning to air more political news.

NEWSPAPERS: THE URBAN ELITE

18. The "Daily Times" and the "Nation" are the two independent daily papers, each with a circulation of about 15,000 copies during the week, 25,000 copies on Saturdays. The print media, as well as electronic media, suffers from lack of resources and trained journalists.

19. The "Daily Times" is owned by Blantyre Print and Publishing Company whose chairman is the ruling party's vice-presidential candidate in the 2004 polls. Formerly owned by Life President Hastings Banda, and still in trust to his family, the "Daily Times" was considered a government paper during Banda's regime. After the first multi-party elections in 1994, the "Daily Times" became increasingly independent, but still lacked the respect accorded the "Nation." As 2004 elections approach, the "Daily Times" is becoming more pro-government, including a new editorial policy that restricts editors to pro-government articles.

110. The "Nation" has had a reputation of independence since its inception in 1993. When the owner of the "Nation", a former cabinet minister, fell out with the ruling UDF party in mid-2003, the tone of the paper began to change. More articles criticizing the government appear and fewer appear in support of the President. As a result, the government has greatly cut back its advertising in the paper.

111. An assortment of weekly papers exist, but only one is considered a "must-read" by the urban community. The "Chronicle" is stridently opposition, but respected by journalists and the public for its outspoken views. Recently the National Association of Media in Southern Africa in Malawi awarded the "Chronicle" its "Best Investigative Reporting Award," and in the past year the "Chronicle" has scooped the daily papers on several important issues, including Muluzi's proposed successor. The "Chronicle" says that it is under much pressure and intimidation from the government, but it continues to speak out.

112. Other weekly papers are decidedly government mouthpieces, such as the "UDF News" and the Information Department's "Weekly News." Some papers appear sporadically, most with a specific agenda of supporting or opposing the government. They are not taken as serious journalism, and circulation is low (several thousand at most.)

TELEVISION MALAWI

113. Television Malawi is another medium for the urban elite. Like MBC, Television Malawi, established only in 1999, is controlled by the state. No opposition politicians appear on TVM: only government rallies and pro-government news are aired. Local programming is, however, limited and the station depends heavily on relayed programming from foreign television stations. Programs are from the BBC, Canal France International, DWS, and several religious television services. One station that formerly relayed programming was TV Africa, which ceased to function in September 2003. In October 2003, the Public Affairs Section donated satellite equipment to Television Malawi allowing it to broadcast VOA, World Net and C-Span everyday.

COMMENT

114. As in all African countries, radio is the most important media outlet. With the recent establishment of private radio, government control of broadcast media is loosening. Although MBC is still the only medium available to the majority of Malawians, private stations are increasing in geographical coverage, and calls for MBC to open its airwaves to opposition politicians are being heard. The three leading newspapers provide credible news coverage,

especially by African standards, and contribute to interesting exchanges of ideas. Their reach is limited, but after 30 years of dictatorship and complete media control, print and private electronic media have made important strides toward independence.

Browning